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Report of the Secretary-General on the Central African Republic

I. Introduction

1. By its resolution 2387 (2017), the Security Council renewed the mandate of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) until 15 November 2018 and requested that I report on its implementation every four months. The present report is submitted pursuant to that resolution.

II. Political situation

2. Signs of political progress were evident in the Central African Republic towards the end of 2017, including steps to strengthen State authority in the prefectures, enhance cooperation between national institutions and lay the foundation for a more comprehensive political process. This progress was marred, however, by continued violence in some parts of the country, as well as by chronic weaknesses in the functioning of State institutions, which undermined the effective deployment of the State's architecture beyond Bangui. Incendiary rhetoric, ethnic stigmatization and religious manipulations continued to play an inflammatory role in national politics and the media, creating an environment in which the risk of inter-ethnic strife remained high.

3. From 24 to 27 October 2017, in my first visit as Secretary-General to a peacekeeping operation, I visited the Central African Republic to express my solidarity with the Central African people. I met with a broad range of stakeholders, including national and local authorities, representatives of civil society and the religious platform, among others. I also met with internally displaced people and humanitarian actors in Bangassou. I listened to a multitude of views on the political process, the security situation, national reconciliation and security sector reform. Throughout these discussions, it was clear that the absence of an accountable State presence in parts of the country compounded a complex mix of challenges, and presented a key obstacle to longer term reconciliation.

4. There was commendable progress in deploying the country's new prefectural administration during the reporting period. By the end of 2017, 14 out of 16 prefects and 63 out of 71 sub-prefects were in post, with significant MINUSCA support. In certain cases, major armed group factions challenged their deployment, requiring extensive consultations to facilitate local acceptance. In this context, on 31 January

2018, the Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique (FPRC) signalled its acceptance of prefects in Vakaga, Nana Grebizi and Bamingui-Bangoran prefectures. The Front populaire stated that its decision was made in response to calls by the African Initiative for Peace and Reconciliation and ahead of the second round of consultations of the panel of facilitators of the Initiative.

5. The Government and National Assembly established constructive working relations, as evidenced by the well-timed passing of the 2018 national budget. In October, the Assembly began holding sessions with the Prime Minister, allowing for regular dialogue and advancing good governance.

6. While the Government engaged in countrywide outreach, President Faustin Touadéra continued engaging with Governments of the subregion, including visits to Chad in October, for the summit of the Central African Economic and Monetary Community, and the Sudan in December. In November, members of the National Assembly visited N'Djamena for the signing of a parliamentary cooperation agreement, and in December the Central African Republic hosted the eighth session of the Forum of Parliaments of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region.

Support for the peace process

7. The panel of facilitators of the African Initiative conducted its first round of meetings with the 14 recognized armed groups in November and December, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of their positions. During the consultations, all armed groups expressed their acceptance of the country's territorial integrity, respect for national institutions and recognition of the legitimacy of the Government. The United Nations system provided extensive support for the consultations. The panel plans to start a second round of consultations in mid-February.

8. Further to Security Council resolution 2387 (2017), MINUSCA focused on advancing local peace and dialogue initiatives in priority regions to help create a conducive environment for the implementation of the African Initiative. A ceasefire agreement and road map to end violence in Bria and in Haute-Kotto prefecture was signed on 19 December after weeks of consultations by the prefect, with the support of MINUSCA. The prefect established a follow-up committee to ensure the absence of weapons in the town and the removal of roadblocks. Anti-balaka associated militias and forces of the Retour, réclamations, réhabilitation (3R) armed group in Bouar signed a cessation of hostilities in December, facilitated by national authorities with support from MINUSCA and the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue. While positive, these local agreements have proven difficult to monitor, and implementation has been irregular, owing, in particular, to seasonal migration.

9. On 30 January 2018, within the context of a joint operation carried out by MINUSCA and the Central African armed forces, and following strong encouragement from the African Initiative and MINUSCA, the Revolution and Justice (RJ) group, led by former Minister Armel Sayo, agreed to fully disarm in accordance with the national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme, becoming the first armed group to voluntarily dissolve itself.

National reconciliation

10. National reconciliation efforts continued to be hampered by cycles of sectarian violence involving different communities, including armed clashes between ex-Seleka armed groups as well between ex-Seleka and anti-balaka armed groups and associated militias. MINUSCA tailored its support to local peace and reconciliation initiatives in order to focus on challenges to the protection of civilians, access to basic social services and the restoration of State authority, including the prevention and

reduction of violence. In November, local peace committees in various prefectures adopted reconciliation strategies for Bangassou, Bria and Zemio. The Ministry of Education, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and MINUSCA facilitated agreements with local communities that allowed authorities to hold school exams in Bangassou, Bria, Obo and Rafai. MINUSCA and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supported these efforts with targeted labour intensive public works projects that facilitated social cohesion and laid the groundwork for the return of displaced persons.

11. Nevertheless, with the onset of the dry season, mistrust and rivalries between communities were increasingly affected by cattle migration and the activities of armed groups attempting to control transhumance corridors. In response, MINUSCA mobilized local transhumance committees in Ouham and Ouham-Pendé prefectures to help prevent conflicts.

III. Security situation

12. In my last report, I called attention to the increase in sectarian violence and the heightened risk of ethnic cleansing in parts of the country. While these tensions remain, the recent period was characterized by a decrease in intercommunal violence and an increase in the number of confrontations between armed groups and self-defence militia, particularly in areas affected by seasonal migration. Competition over the control of territory and access to natural resources remained the key driver of violence among the armed groups.

13. In the west of the country, with the reopening of transhumance corridors, anti-balaka forces repeatedly clashed with Fulani herders in Mambéré-Kadéï prefecture after armed Fulani looted villages near Gamboula, killing five civilians.

14. MINUSCA successfully removed 3R forces from Bocaranga and the Mouvement patriotique pour la Centrafrique (MPC) from Bang in November, ending a cycle of violence between these groups and anti-balaka associated militias. The agreement between the 3R and local anti-balaka groups, signed in Bouar, contributed to an improved overall security situation in the area.

15. In Ouham-Pendé, a newly established MPC splinter group known as the Mouvement national pour la libération de la Centrafrique (MNLC) clashed with forces of RJ over control of territory and trade routes. In coalition with anti-balaka associated militias, RJ forces launched targeted attacks against MNLC and civilian Muslim communities between 27 December and 4 January around Paoua, resulting in the killing of four civilians and the internal displacement of at least 1,200 persons. During attacks to regain territory, MNLC forces also attacked civilians around Paoua, burning thousands of houses and, in some cases, entire villages. In mid-January, MINUSCA launched a military operation, which, soon afterwards, was carried out jointly with the Central African armed forces. The operation resulted in a reduced presence of armed groups around Paoua.

16. Further east, in Ouham prefecture, confrontations between anti-balaka and MPC for control of Batangafo intensified, with the near destruction of Ouogo and Kambakota villages by MPC on 19 and 21 December, respectively, including the displacement of some 2,000 civilians. In addition, since 13 January, clashes between MNLC and RJ spilled over to the Markounda-Kouki axis in Ouham prefecture, leading to significant population displacements to nearby villages, which remain under MPC control.

17. In the central part of the country, representatives of FPRC, the Rassemblement des républicains (RDR), an anti-balaka faction, and the Union patriotique pour la

Centrafrique (UPC) formed a temporary alliance on 6 October in Ippy, briefly improving security in Ouaka and Basse-Kotto prefectures. The implementation of the agreement proved challenging because of diverging economic interests and divisions within FPRC. For example, on 7 and 8 December, clashes in Ippy between rival factions of FPRC resulted in an undetermined number of casualties and over 15,000 displaced civilians. Illustrating the fragility of the agreement, in mid-December, UPC elements reportedly killed the leader of RDR.

18. FPRC and MPC continued to sabotage the redeployment of State authorities in Bamingui-Bangoran, Vakaga and Nana-Grebizi prefectures. On 9 December, unidentified elements launched a rocket into the MINUSCA camp in Kaga Bandoro, in an apparent protest against the arrival of the new prefect. The device exploded without causing casualties or damage. In addition, MPC and FPRC supporters torched administrative buildings in violent riots against the prefect's deployment.

19. In the eastern part of the country, Mbomou prefecture continued to be an area of major concern owing to ongoing tensions between UPC and militias loosely associated with anti-balaka, apparently motivated by competition over illegal revenues. On 18 October, anti-balaka associated militias attacked Pombolo, a majority Fulani village, killing at least 26 civilians. On 30 December, clashes between anti-balaka groups resulted in the killing of anti-balaka associated militia leader Mahamat Ngade, and the escape and apprehension of anti-balaka associated militia leader Romaric Madango in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. On 20 January, as tensions increased among militia leaders, the local anti-balaka leader, known as "Bere-Bere", surrendered to MINUSCA and was subsequently transferred to Bangui for prosecution. Bere-Bere, Ngade and Madango are all thought to have been involved in the May 2017 killing of five peacekeepers in Yongofongo and in ongoing attacks on the Muslim community in Bangassou. With United Nations support, the Central African authorities are preparing a request for Madango's extradition.

20. Following clashes during the previous reporting period, the situation in Bangassou evolved into a low-intensity conflict. MINUSCA continues to provide protection to the some 1,500 mostly Muslim civilians displaced at the Catholic mission. Regular attacks by anti-balaka against internally displaced people, as well as humanitarian actors and peacekeepers, continued. On 4 January, armed men attacked the head of Bangassou's peace and reconciliation committee.

21. The Mbomou and Basse-Kotto areas remained a particularly challenging environment both for humanitarian actors and MINUSCA owing to continued attacks against aid convoys by anti-balaka associated militia on 10 separate occasions, in which one peacekeeper was killed and four injured. In November, MINUSCA peacekeepers were temporarily deployed to Mobaye to reinforce protection hotspots around Basse-Kotto.

22. In Haute-Kotto, violence by armed groups continued to pose a grave threat to civilians. Circumstances remain largely unchanged for the 73,000 people who have been internally displaced in Bria since May 2017. Ethnic tensions were exacerbated by recurrent fighting between FPRC and anti-balaka associated militias in competition for control of illicit taxation on roads leading to Bria. On 4 December, anti-balaka associated militias attacked a MINUSCA checkpoint in front of the PK3 displaced persons camp, killing one peacekeeper. Local authorities in Bria supported by MINUSCA launched a road map for peace in Haute-Kotto on 19 December to contain the violence. The ex-Seleka joined the initiative, while only some local anti-balaka associated militias signed the agreement.

23. The Lord's Resistance Army continued to pose a threat to civilians in the southeast. In late October, presumed elements of the group attacked villages and abducted five civilians in Mbomou and Haute-Kotto prefectures.

24. In contrast to the situation in some parts of the country, the security situation in Bangui remained relatively stable. Recurring rumours of destabilization by violent spoilers did not materialize. Most reported incidents in Bangui could be categorized as acts of criminality. In the third district of Bangui there were occasional clashes between militia motivated by internal power struggles and competition over illegal taxes. These tensions pose a threat to civilians, as exemplified by two grenade attacks, on 11 November and 17 January, killing six people in total and triggering retaliatory attacks.

25. MINUSCA staff and property were also the target of violent acts by the local population in Bangui. On 24 November, a fatal road accident wrongly attributed to a MINUSCA vehicle resulted in violent mobs throwing stones at United Nations vehicles throughout the day, resulting in three peacekeepers injured and three MINUSCA vehicles destroyed.

Operationalization of internal security forces and the Central African Armed Forces

26. On 30 October, the Minister of Defence signed a concept-of-deployment paper for the Central African armed forces, laying out principles and requirements for the training of the national armed forces by the European Union Military Training Mission. The concept foresees a progressive deployment of such trained battalions, within the context of efforts to extend State authority. It also outlines a coordination mechanism between MINUSCA, the Training Mission and other partners. In line with resolution 2387 (2017), MINUSCA is coordinating with the national authorities, the Training Mission and other partners the development of a plan to support the gradual redeployment of these trained Central African armed forces and internal security forces, as well as for the management and storage of donated weapons and ammunitions. A first detachment of 70 soldiers of the Central African armed forces trained by the European Union Mission was deployed to Obo in November. The Government deployed an additional 72 soldiers of the Central African armed forces to Paoua to work alongside MINUSCA to help protect civilians and stabilize the area. Despite the weak logistical and sustainment support, these elements have demonstrated an encouraging degree of discipline, transparency and cooperation with MINUSCA.

Safety and security of United Nations staff

27. During the reporting period, United Nations premises and convoys were directly targeted, particularly in the southeastern and central parts of the country, on 13 occasions. National and international staff were subject to threats of kidnapping, robbery and intimidation. There were 123 security incidents directly involving United Nations personnel, including 63 serious armed attacks, two death threats and 61 road traffic accidents. Two peacekeepers lost their lives in hostile attacks and 16 were injured (including 11 as a result of hostile attacks). Temporary restrictions on the movement of United Nations personnel were imposed in some locations because of elevated risk levels.

IV. Humanitarian situation

28. The humanitarian situation remains critical, with more than half of Central Africans, some 2.5 million people, in need of humanitarian assistance. Of that number, over 1 million people live in the prefectures of Mambéré-Kadéï, Ouaka, Ouham and Ouham-Pendé. The Central African Republic has one of the highest

proportion of citizens in need per capita worldwide, and roughly half are children under 18 years of age.

29. The upsurge of violence during the first three quarters of 2017 in the prefectures of Basse-Kotto, Haut-Mbomou and Mbomou led to an increase in the number of internally displaced persons, bringing the total to over 688,000 people — a 70 per cent increase in one year. The number of refugees increased by 26 per cent, surpassing 545,000 refugees in neighbouring countries. By the end of 2017, as a consequence of the conflict in the Central African Republic, a total of 1.24 million people, the highest number yet recorded, had been forcibly displaced, either as refugees or as displaced persons.

30. Insecurity and recurrent displacement led to a 58 per cent decline in crop production, increased food prices and an elevated risk of malnutrition. Every second person in the country is in a food-insecure situation. The sanitary environment is also of grave concern as 70 per cent of households are without access to drinking water, and 80 per cent live without latrines. The maternal mortality rate of 882 per 100,000 live births and the under-five child mortality rate of 13 per cent illustrate the critical health situation. At the end of 2017, 500 schools were closed due to insecurity, with particularly dire situations in Basse-Kotto, Haute-Kotto, Haut-Mbomou and Mbomou prefectures, where nearly all schools have been closed.

31. Despite significant donor mobilization efforts, humanitarian activities remain underfunded. The 2017 Humanitarian Response Plan was only 38.7 per cent funded, meaning that 61.3 per cent of the needs were not covered. The 2018 Humanitarian Appeal for the Central African Republic is asking $515.6 million to meet increased needs compared with the previous year. Despite limited resources, humanitarian actors continued to provide life-saving and critical activities. In 2017, some 57,000 children benefited from educational activities, over 600,000 people received emergency food assistance, 1.4 million people were provided with drinking water and 55,000 households were housed in emergency shelter.

32. In 2017, 14 aid workers were killed, making the Central African Republic one of the most dangerous places for humanitarian work worldwide. A total of 297 humanitarian workers who were temporarily relocated due to insecurity in 2017 have since returned to areas where calm has been restored. Conflict between armed groups and lack of infrastructure have significantly restricted humanitarian access.

33. Continued conflict has enabled only a slow return of the internally displaced and refugee populations to their villages of origin. Only 45,000 Central African refugees returned to their villages of origin in 2017. The slow pace of recovery and development activities to support the return of these populations exacerbates the need for humanitarian activities. Efforts to improve the nexus between humanitarian workers and development actors are being enhanced, and joint needs analysis is being undertaken together with MINUSCA.

V. Protection of civilians

34. The civilian population, and minority communities in particular, continued to bear the brunt of violence. MINUSCA continued strengthening its early warning and response efforts as well as enhancing civil-military coordination, organizing joint assessments, deploying joint protection teams and engaging all relevant actors. Despite these efforts, the response capacity of MINUSCA remains weak, owing primarily to the effect of poor road infrastructure on mobility.

35. MINUSCA developed several integrated local protection plans with United Nations agencies, designed to contain violence, revive intercommunal dialogue,

prioritize return strategies for displaced persons, relaunch socioeconomic activity and enable free movement of civilian populations. For example, in Zemio, Haut-Mbomou prefecture, MINUSCA provided training on protection strategies for different communities, creating entry points for mediation and social cohesion activities.

36. MINUSCA continued to identify priority regions where additional protection capacity is required, particularly to prevent transhumance-related violence, while ensuring that local security strategies include community input through the protection cluster. On 20 December, a temporary MINUSCA integrated team deployed to Batangafo, Ouham prefecture, in response to violence against civilians. MINUSCA peacekeepers deployed to the Bangassou area in December, as well as to Mobaye, Basse-Kotto prefecture, in November, and to Paoua, Ouham-Pendé prefecture, in January, to reinforce protection hotspots.

37. Through the United Nations Mine Action Service, MINUSCA disposed of 812,524 pieces of ammunition and explosive ordnance and provided risk education sessions to 21,516 beneficiaries.

VI. Extension of State authority and the rule of law

Extension of State authority

38. Since the Government's endorsement of the national strategy for the restoration of State authority in September 2017, 14 prefects and 63 sub-prefects have been deployed. Integrated planning and programming between line ministries and relevant national authorities, including the United Nations system, non-governmental and international partners, supported this effort. With the support of MINUSCA and the United Nations country team, the Government is finalizing a mapping of the State presence to prioritize the deployment of basic services.

39. Meanwhile, efforts to re-establish the ordinary court system continued. Nineteen out of 24 first instance and appellate courts are now functioning at a basic level, including 12 outside of Bangui. Although the main challenges are primarily political, operational bottlenecks such as weak State coordination capacity and funding shortfalls threaten to undermine the judicial re-establishment process. MINUSCA has provided extensive political, security and logistical support for these deployments and has worked to ensure their local acceptance. As part of these efforts, the Mission has undertaken projects with the European Union and UNDP to equip public infrastructure.

40. In response to acute protection challenges in Obo and Zemio, Haut-Mbomou prefecture, 70 members of the Central African armed forces, trained by the European Union Military Training Mission and vetted and screened under the United Nations human rights due diligence policy, were deployed to work alongside MINUSCA troops. By November, 90 members of the internal security forces had deployed to Bambari and 25 to Bangassou to restore law and order.

Justice and the rule of law

41. Significant steps have been taken in the fight against impunity, particularly through the resumption of criminal sessions in the Bangui and Bouar Courts of Appeal, as well as progress in arrests and investigations against suspected perpetrators of serious crimes. In January 2018, at the third criminal session of the Bangui Court of Appeal organized since 2015, for the first time, several members of armed groups were convicted: a prominent anti-balaka leader, Rodrigue Ngaïbona, alias "General" Andjilo, was sentenced to life imprisonment; another anti-balaka member was sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment; and two ex-Séléka members

were sentenced in absentia for the murder of a magistrate. At the Bouar Court of Appeal, 42 cases were tried during the first criminal session held since 2008, leading to 62 individual convictions.

42. During the reporting period, the Mission, through the use of urgent temporary measures, apprehended 27 individuals suspected of various crimes, including kidnapping, rape, murder, armed robbery, torture, illegal possession of firearms, looting and criminal conspiracy. Due to the lack of judicial and penitentiary infrastructure outside the capital, and at the request of the Government, MINUSCA facilitated the transfer of 25 suspects to prisons in Bangui and provided advice on investigations and judicial proceedings.

43. Efforts to operationalize the Special Criminal Court continued, despite delays in starting investigations linked to the appointment and review of the Court's judicial police officers and to the adoption of the draft rules of procedure and evidence. Nine of the 11 magistrates responsible for leading investigation and prosecution activities have been deployed. The Chief Registrar has been appointed, and the process for the selection of the Deputy Chief Registrar is ongoing.

44. The demilitarization of the prison system continued, with the support of MINUSCA and UNDP. The Ministry of Justice deployed 34 civilian personnel to existing prisons, while the Central African armed forces handed over the Bouar prison to civilian management. In January, national authorities launched a recruitment drive for 150 new civilian prisons personnel and began to implement it in Bangui, Bouar and Bossangoa. Overcrowding, compounded by deteriorating prison conditions, constitutes a major challenge in Ngaragba prison and its annex at Camp de Roux, both at well over 200 per cent of their capacity. MINUSCA continues to coordinate with the Ministry of Justice and partners to improve the management and security of prisons and to enhance conditions of detention while advocating with the Government for increased and transparently-managed financial resources.

Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration

45. Pending the implementation of the national programme on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, and to help create an environment conducive to the advancement of the political process, MINUSCA continued to refocus its assistance in this area, taking into consideration the dynamics of the armed groups and local security situations. With support of the United Nations Mine Action Service, the pilot project on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration was concluded in seven locations: 440 participants from 12 armed groups surrendered 360 weapons, 376 various explosive ammunitions, and 5,220 rounds of small arms ammunition; 240 participants are being trained by the European Union Military Training Mission for integration into the armed forces; and 200 have joined community reintegration programmes.

46. An increased focus on violence reduction projects within communities throughout the country was adopted in support of local peace agreements as well as broader peace efforts, including capacity-building for local conflict resolution and violence prevention, protection of civilians and weapons collection. An initial programme concluded in Bangui and in Ouham-Pendé prefecture for 10,000 participants was expanded to include an additional 8,100 participants, with a focus on areas where there has been recent conflict and where there is a proliferation of local militias, including Bambari, Bangassou, Batangafo, Bouar, Bria and Kaga-Bandoro.

Security sector reform

47. The development of a strategic framework for security sector reform continued through the ongoing implementation of the national strategy. The national technical

committee coordinated by the national security sector reform adviser, with MINUSCA and UNDP support, initiated the drafting of five sectoral plans on justice and corrections, customs, water and forests, communications and intelligence.

48. On 18 November, President Touadéra signed two decrees on the organization and functions for the Central African armed forces and the general staff. The decrees assign public security tasks to the armed forces. During the reporting period, 1,313 members of the armed forces were verified, bringing the total to 7,113 out of 7,735 registered. Operational training by the European Union Military Training Mission advanced during the reporting period, with the completion, on 15 December, of the training of a second battalion, and the beginning, in January, of the training of a third battalion.

49. The national authorities, with MINUSCA and UNDP support, finalized the training curricula and medical examinations for the training of the 500 police and gendarmerie recruits. The Police Academy in Bangui, rehabilitated with UNDP support, started hosting police trainees.

50. MINUSCA continued to train members of the defence and security forces on weapons and ammunition management. It also expanded the ammunition depot at Camp Kassai in Bangui and completed the rehabilitation of six armouries in Bangui.

VII. Human rights and the fight against impunity

51. During the reporting period, the human rights situation deteriorated as a result of continuous violations and abuses committed by armed groups and internal security forces. MINUSCA documented 1,283 human rights abuses, violations of international human rights law and violations of international humanitarian law, as compared with 809 during the previous reporting cycle, affecting 1,302 victims, comprising 797 men, 117 women, 191 children (131 boys and 60 girls) and 197 unidentified victims. Frequent violations included killings, cruel and inhuman treatment, conflict-related sexual violence, arbitrary detention, deprivation of liberty, abduction, recruitment of children, destruction of civilian property, attacks against schools and denial of humanitarian access.

52. Armed groups were responsible for over 33 per cent (or 434 incidents) of all human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law: ex-Séléka factions (200); anti-balaka (148); 3R (23); MPC/RJ (23); Lord's Resistance Army (21); Front démocratique du peuple centrafricain (3); MNLC (2); and other organized self-defence groups (14). National security forces were responsible for 327 violations, including 306 cases of arbitrary detention, of which 199 were attributed to the gendarmerie and 123 to the police.

53. During the reporting period, MINUSCA verified 5,011 members of the defence and security forces, civil servants and armed groups, using all available data, including on human rights, violations of the rights of children in armed conflict, violations of international humanitarian law, conflict-related sexual violence and criminal records. During the reporting period, MINUSCA submitted verification reports for 700 new police and gendarme recruits, 3,254 registered police and gendarme officers, 760 participants in the pilot project on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration, 81 judicial police officers for the Special Criminal Court, 16 prefects and 200 members of the armed forces. In accordance with the human rights due diligence policy, MINUSCA also conducted 28 risk assessments and verified 460 members of the national security forces, as part of which three individuals were excluded from receiving United Nations support.

54. The Special Criminal Court continued to develop its prosecution strategy, supported by MINUSCA, including through the provision of human rights documents, including the 2003–2015 human rights mapping report released by the Mission and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. In addition, MINUSCA provided 120 human rights documents to the International Criminal Court in response to requests from the Court. During the reporting period, MINUSCA consulted with line ministries and national partners to reactivate the transitional justice working group in order to support the work of the Government in drafting a national transitional justice strategy.

Conflict-related sexual violence

55. MINUSCA documented 73 incidents of conflict-related sexual violence affecting 86 victims, as compared with 55 for the previous period. Most acts of conflict-related sexual violence appear to be opportunistic, although others can be driven by interethnic hatred, or may constitute deliberate acts of war.

Children and armed conflict

56. The recruitment and use of children by armed groups and sexual violence against children remained an issue of major concern. Nonetheless, following a command directive, the UPC armed group released 73 boys, who were sent to a UNICEF-funded transit centre in Bambari for reintegration activities pending family tracing and reunification. MINUSCA continued building the capacity of child protection focal points for FPRC and MPC, as a result of which: 63 children, half of whom were girls, were separated from FPRC, MPC and Séléka rénovée in Kaga-Bandoro; a total of 216 children (including 101 girls) were released from the Mouvement des libérateurs centrafricains pour la justice in Birao; and an additional 1,013 children (338 girls and 675 boys) self-demobilized from anti-balaka associated militias. All concerned children were handed over to UNICEF and partner organizations for subsequent reintegration programmes, although lack of funding for long-term reintegration has negatively affected child protection efforts.

VIII. Socioeconomic situation

57. Most recent figures show macroeconomic performance below expectations as growth continues to be stifled by the security situation, with an estimated three million citizens of the Central African Republic living in extreme poverty. State revenue growth in 2016 and 2017 was lower than projected, close to the African average of 2.2 per cent of gross domestic product, while growth forecasts for 2018 have been marred by the crisis. The 2018 budget projects a 40.8 per cent increase in the national deficit, given that both domestic and external support revenues are expected to decrease while expenditures will increase owing to the expansion of the Government and the creation of new institutions. Domestic resource mobilization remains well below the threshold of flexibility required to plan for expansion in key social sectors, leaving the country highly dependent on external resources and limiting the space for new capital investments.

Implementation of the National Recovery and Peacebuilding Plan and the Mutual Engagement Framework

58. On 11 and 12 December, the Government held the first annual review of the National Recovery and Peacebuilding Plan and the Mutual Engagement Framework. President Touadéra opened the event before the National Assembly, sharing his vision for national ownership of the country's recovery and noting challenges to

implementation, such as delays across ministries and the limited number of local service providers to implement projects.

59. To date, the National Recovery and Peacebuilding Plan is being implemented with a total budget of $1.8 billion, with an estimated implementation rate of 16 per cent in 2017. Pillar 3 of the plan (revitalization of the economy through agriculture and infrastructure) is the least advanced, with an implementation rate of 7 per cent in 2017.

60. Partners have expressed concern that the slow rate of implementation risks undermining potential livelihood dividends and access to socioeconomic opportunities. Furthermore, a review of pillar 1 of the plan (peace, security and national reconciliation) identified critical gaps in funding for the security sector.

Natural resources management

61. During the reporting period, the Ministry of Mining and MINUSCA undertook a joint mission to Berberati, a green zone designated by the Kimberley Process, to explore a framework that would ensure national oversight and taxation over income generated by the illicit exploitation of natural resources. MINUSCA also supported field assessment missions by lead ministries for natural resource management and the development of a nationally-owned strategy to tackle the illicit exploitation and trafficking of natural resources.

IX. Mission capacities

A. Military

62. As at 10 February, MINUSCA had deployed 10,665 military personnel, representing 90 per cent of a total authorized strength of 11,650, comprising 11 infantry battalions, a special forces company, a quick-reaction force company, an unmanned aerial vehicle unit and several enabling units, as well as a military police company, four engineering companies, a heavy-transport company, three level II hospitals, a signal company and three helicopter units, including a combat helicopter unit. Women constituted 5.4 per cent of military personnel. Troop-contributing countries continued to improve the equipment of their respective contingents and self-sustainment. The increased number of hotspots, however, led to a proliferation of temporary and permanent operating bases, which weakened the troops' potential to project strength. The Mission developed night-capable helicopter landing sites in seven locations, in addition to the two already established in Bangui.

B. Police

63. As at 10 February, MINUSCA had deployed 2,044 police personnel, 98.2 per cent of the authorized strength of 2,080, comprising 380 individual police officers (including 50 women, representing 95.3 per cent of the 400 authorized strength), and 10 formed police units and 2 protection support units, comprising 1,664 officers (including 112 women, representing 99.3 per cent of the 1,680 authorized strength). Outside of Bangui, 113 individual police officers are deployed at 11 sites, four formed police units are deployed in Bambari, Bouar, Bria and Kaga Bandoro and half a unit has been temporarily deployed in Bangassou.

C. Civilian personnel

64. As at 10 February, MINUSCA had deployed 1,390 civilian personnel, representing 80 per cent of the total of 1,747 authorized positions (642 international, 518 national and 231 United Nations Volunteers). Women constituted 25 per cent of civilian personnel overall, with 23 per cent in positions at the P-5 level or above. The recruitment and retention of female staff, including United Nations Volunteers, continues to be a priority.

D. Status-of-forces agreement

65. During the reporting period, the Government and MINUSCA continued meetings, led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, on the status-of-forces agreement. Some outstanding issues were resolved during the talks, including the taxation rate for fuel in 2018 and the signing of customs exoneration forms, submitted on 9 November 2017, to cover the Mission's diesel and jet A-1 fuel supplies. However, the Government has not yet reimbursed the Mission for some $9 million in fuel taxes already paid by MINUSCA. Discussions continue on two judgments against a local fuel supplier for failing to collect taxes on the sale of fuel to the United Nations. On 13 December, the Government agreed that MINUSCA could resume importing sugar, following a 28 per cent increase in price charged by a local company on 17 July, at a time when global prices for sugar had fallen by 33 per cent. On 19 December, seven MINUSCA trucks transporting prefabricated containers to Bangui were detained by national authorities but later released.

E. Efforts to improve performance

66. The Mission continued efforts to improve performance across all components, adopting a comprehensive approach and creating multi-disciplinary teams to focus on specific geographic areas. These temporary operational coordination teams comprise uniformed and civilian staff and, where necessary, United Nations partners. The Mission continues to improve overall operational coordination and information sharing capacity and to ensure the optimal application of a growing range of information collection systems.

67. In November, my Under-Secretary General for Peacekeeping Operations commissioned a special independent investigation into attacks against civilians that occurred in the south-eastern prefectures from 1 May to 31 August 2017, and the MINUSCA response to those incidents. The report made recommendations to improve the Mission's protection of civilians efforts and to engage troop- and police-contributing countries to enhance operational readiness.

Serious misconduct, including sexual exploitation and abuse

68. During the reporting period, allegations of serious misconduct, notably sexual exploitation and abuse, continued to decline, with two new allegations of such misconduct by MINUSCA forces received during the reporting period, compared to four allegations during the previous reporting period. These recent allegations are pending investigation by the relevant troop-contributing country and the United Nations.

69. MINUSCA has been taking all necessary measures to ensure its full compliance with my zero-tolerance policy. The Mission has also implemented strict non-fraternization policies and undertaken targeted and frequent training activities

for United Nations personnel, awareness raising activities for the host population, joint patrols and risk assessment visits.

70. MINUSCA, in coordination with humanitarian members of the Task Force on Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, has established strong partnerships with local authorities and civil society organizations for the reception of complaints and allegations. MINUSCA has trained and equipped over 200 men and women, designated by national authorities and non-governmental organizations, to serve as network focal points in six high-risk locations. The focal points and local populations have access to the new free-of-charge hotline for reporting serious misconduct by United Nations personnel. In accordance with victim assistance protocols established with service providers, including UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund, MINUSCA referred three victims for appropriate assistance.

X. Observations

71. Since the issuance of my previous report, the country has continued to face unacceptable levels of violence coupled with an extremely worrying humanitarian situation. Clashes have displaced a record number of civilians both inside and outside the country, reaching total numbers that surpass figures during the height of the crisis. In addition, human rights abuses are again on the rise. In the absence of an effective State authority in most parts of the country and with an increased level of fragmentation, armed groups and self-defence militia continue to prey on communities, compete for control over land and resources, hinder aid delivery to those in need and prevent economic drivers, such as seasonal transhumance, from benefitting all Central Africans. These trends present an untenable situation, with the potential to further destabilize the country and diminish the gains made since the end of the transition.

72. My visit to the Central African Republic allowed me to witness how, despite the persistence of violence and the intolerable human suffering, the country has made progress in recent years, especially in Bangui. I was particularly encouraged by the resilience of the people, and their thirst for peace and development. I also took stock of the deep divisions that threaten to pull apart an already polarized society along ethnic and religious lines. I impressed upon the people of the Central African Republic that the solution to the crisis can only be found through dialogue and reconciliation among themselves. While I called on the Central African authorities to take full ownership of the peace process and the future of the country, I also conveyed the unflinching determination of the United Nations to stand by the people of the country in their quest for peace.

73. In this, my first visit to a peacekeeping operation, I also witnessed the critical role played by MINUSCA in improving the lives of the people of the Central African Republic. Despite the numerous challenges, and in a context of negative discourse, the Mission plays an instrumental role in protecting civilians. An unacceptably high number of peacekeepers and aid workers have paid the ultimate price for peace. I condemn, in the strongest terms, the heinous attacks against those who work to help the people of that country, and I strongly denounce the poisonous and populist discourse aimed at further deepening the divide between communities and impeding peace efforts.

74. Despite the worrying indicators for peace, the last few months have seen important steps towards finding a peaceful political solution to ending the recurrent cycles of violence. I welcome the launch of consultations by the panel of facilitators of the African Initiative with the main armed groups, civil society and others. This first listening tour, for which the United Nations provided extensive support, marks a

positive step forward in the peace process and it has been followed by the first commitments by armed groups to fully disarm and return to civilian life. Despite the many challenges and differences, all armed groups welcomed the opportunity for peaceful dialogue. The goodwill generated by this first demarche must now be rapidly capitalized upon in order to deepen discussions with and between the people of the Central African Republic on how to address legitimate grievances and identify concrete steps to end armed confrontations and violence against civilians. I encourage the Panel to work in a coherent manner and to continue to include all segments of society in the dialogue, with continued support from MINUSCA and other partners. I welcome President Touadera's commitment to seize this momentum to cement and broaden national ownership of the peace process, in close partnership with the panel of facilitators. The United Nations system will continue its full support to this peace initiative, under the leadership of the Government.

75. In order for the peace process to succeed, it must be driven by an interest in the well-being of the people of the Central African Republic instead of personal considerations or resentments. The population deserves to see rapid and concrete benefits, in terms of improved security, access to social services and the functioning of State institutions that serve them. Although time is needed for a meaningful dialogue process to address the many root causes of the crisis, immediate steps to reduce violence and to foster reconciliation, disarmament and integration are needed. To that end, the Government must step up efforts to implement its road map for the restoration of State authority, including through the deployment of prefects and key officials from social services-related ministries, backed by internal security forces, to lead local peace efforts, start basic recovery activities and curb criminality, the main driver of violence. In addition, the continued support and engagement of the subregion, and the wider international community, is critical in order to ensure the successful implementation of any eventual all-inclusive political agreement. In this regard, we must draw on the lessons learned from past peace efforts in the country, which, too often, have not been honoured or implemented owing to lack of sustained political commitment by the parties.

76. Difficult hurdles remain because of the fragmentation of armed groups and their continued engagement in violence and criminal conduct, including exploitation of the country's resources. Several armed groups routinely engage in sectarian violence, triggering intercommunal strife, which is exacerbated by certain immoderate media outlets and opportunistic political leaders. This is simply unacceptable. It not only risks further inflaming violence, but also negatively fuels the concept of identity and citizenship, consensus on which is essential to the political process so that the country may overcome the conflict. In this complex context, a flexible approach to the peace process is important, including by combining efforts at national dialogue with complementary local conflict resolution initiatives, as recommended in my prior report.

77. No peace process will be successful without the engagement of, and with, the local communities and the full and unwavering commitment of all parties to honour the principles of the process. I call upon the armed groups to demonstrate their commitment to peaceful dialogue by stopping violence, criminal conduct and the mobilization of forces, and by ceasing their coercion over communities they claim to protect. I strongly denounce hateful discourse and all attempts to incite violence and derail peace efforts, and I welcome the determination of the Security Council to hold accountable those obstructing the peace process and inciting violence. I also encourage the Central African authorities to strengthen their efforts to arrest, detain and prosecute, with the support of MINUSCA, those who continue to commit serious crimes against the population and against international actors. The international community should remain united and be firm with those individuals, as well as with

recalcitrant groups and State actors, that continue to obstruct progress and refuse to allow the Central African population to heal, the State to extend its authority and the country to recover.

78. I encourage the Government to build upon its important achievements, and to take advantage of the positive spirit created by the initial round of consultations by the panel of facilitators of the African Initiative to enhance dialogue and national reconciliation. I call upon the Central African authorities and political stakeholders to demonstrate statesmanship and to overcome divisions by championing peace and national reconciliation efforts for the betterment of the population of the entire country. In this regard, I welcome the deployment of State administration throughout the Central African Republic, and I call upon the new local administrations to be a voice for peace and reconciliation. I welcome the first success of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration pilot project, and encourage the armed groups to join the national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme in order to ensure rapid disarmament and the creation of more inclusive national security forces.

79. The sustainability of the peace process and the future of the Central African State rely on the ability of the Government, with the support of MINUSCA, the United Nations country team, the region and the international community, to build functioning and accountable State institutions that deliver for the country's people. I am encouraged by the Government's efforts to rebuild local administrations, which represent a significant step towards stabilization and a clear path towards the gradual withdrawal of MINUSCA. It is essential that local authorities rebuild trust in the State to protect and serve its citizens countrywide, and address grievances related to marginalization. This provides an opportunity for the State to bring tangible benefits and hope to the population by honouring its commitments contained in the National Recovery and Peacebuilding Plan and Mutual Accountability Framework on the deployment of social services, security forces and judiciary throughout the country. I am hopeful that an increased and accountable State presence will have positive effects for national reconciliation and will enhance the rule of law outside of Bangui.

80. While I am alarmed by the rise in human rights violations, I commend the Central African authorities for the notable progress in their efforts to end impunity, as demonstrated by the resumption of the sessions of the Courts of Appeal in Bouar and Bangui, and the conviction elements of several armed groups. To end impunity, it is essential to continue building the capacity of the judicial branch and the corrections system, and to establish key national human rights bodies that complement the work of the Special Criminal Court. I urge the Government and the National Assembly to swiftly adopt the rules of procedure and evidence for the Special Criminal Court, without which the Court will be unable to start its investigations. I encourage Member States to maintain their support and funding for the Court at this crucial juncture.

81. The call for justice that emerged from the Bangui Forum on National Reconciliation in 2015 needs to be realized by the Government within a comprehensive national transitional justice strategy, as part of the broader peace process under the African Initiative, building on the complementarity of judicial and non-judicial measures. I commend the establishment of the steering committee tasked with defining truth-seeking mechanisms and vetting legislation, and I call for the full participation of all voices of the Central African population in this process. I also encourage the panel of facilitators of the African Initiative to usefully build on and integrate their ongoing work on transitional justice into the negotiations among the parties at the appropriate time.

82. I am encouraged by the ongoing positive collaboration between the Government of the Central African Republic and international partners, including MINUSCA and

the European Union Military Training Mission, in preparing the sustainable redeployment of the Central African armed forces trained by the Military Training Mission, as well as their rearmament through the licit transfer of weapons and ammunition. I commend, in particular, the efforts to coordinate this redeployment with those of the police and gendarmerie within the broader framework of the extension of State authority and the development of a security sector reform framework, and I encourage the Central African authorities to immediately start the training of the 500 new police and gendarmerie officers recruited as part of their efforts to build and deploy a professional internal security forces throughout the country.

83. I also encourage the Central African authorities, with the support of MINUSCA, to continue closely coordinating all assistance to their defence and security forces with the European Union Military Training Mission and other partners in order to ensure a unified approach to the re-operationalization of these forces, in compliance with the United Nations human rights due diligence policy. The Central African authorities will need to progressively assume responsibility for sustaining national security forces that are professional and representative of the country's diversity. I intend to present recommendations in this regard to the Security Council by 15 May 2018.

84. Efforts to find a durable peace and to create a functioning Central African State cannot be seen in isolation from the dire circumstances that the majority of the country's people are experiencing in their daily lives. I was deeply troubled to witness the extremely worrying humanitarian situation during my visit, which negatively impacts all peace and recovery efforts. Funding shortfalls and the deteriorating security situation hamper the delivery of aid, leaving many people cut off from assistance. The recurrent violence in many parts of the country has resulted in an unacceptable record number of displaced people in the past year. Similarly, I am appalled by continued attacks against aid workers and convoys. To ensure that those in need receive adequate assistance, I cannot stress enough that attacks against humanitarian workers must cease immediately and the perpetrators must be held accountable. I call upon the international community to increase efforts and funding to avoid a humanitarian catastrophe.

85. The economic situation of the country directly contributes to instability. As such, the peace and national reconciliation process should be coupled with efforts to promote investment in economic recovery and development. Advancing economic recovery will be critical in order to rebuild and maintain trust in State institutions and to overcome the humanitarian crisis. I am encouraged to learn that President Touadéra has prioritized development efforts in the prefectures as part of the National Recovery and Peacebuilding Plan. In this regard, I encourage the humanitarian community to consider initiating recovery projects alongside emergency response in other places, where possible, especially where the spontaneous return of displaced people is ongoing. It is vital that the Government, humanitarian and development actors work hand in hand to create conditions conducive to the voluntary return of displaced populations to their homes in safety and dignity.

86. I welcome the strengthening of MINUSCA and the refocusing of its mandate along core peace and security tasks, in recognition of the urgent need to prevent a further deterioration of the situation in the Central African Republic. The latest cases of multidimensional crisis response, such as in Bangassou, Bria and Paoua, illustrate renewed efforts to rapidly align all actors under a protection strategy. Increasingly, MINUSCA is relying on these strategies to stop violence and to revive intercommunal dialogue in the immediate aftermath of crisis, and the Mission is also prioritizing the return of displaced persons and the rapid relaunching of socioeconomic activity. Efforts are also under way to generate additional authorized forces without delay.

Meanwhile, MINUSCA will continue optimizing its performance and improving its accountability. I welcome the internal report of the special investigation into incidents that occurred in the southeast of the country between 1 May and 31 August 2017, and will ensure the implementation of its recommendations. Ultimately, however, the Mission's ability to successfully implement its mandate depends on efforts to advance the political process and strengthen State authority and inclusive governance, with an eventual exit strategy for MINUSCA in mind. As such, I am encouraged by MINUSCA's efforts to support the political process through the African Initiative by building on the framework and space created by it to focus its political engagement, particularly at the local level where the Mission has a comparative advantage.

87. I also welcome the Mission's continued efforts, particularly its improved prevention strategy, to ensure full adherence to the United Nations zero-tolerance policy on sexual exploitation and abuse. The continued downward trend in allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse is an encouraging sign that these efforts are bearing fruit. I encourage MINUSCA to continue its work to prevent and deter these heinous acts and hold their perpetrators accountable, while ensuring that victims receive the full support of the United Nations.

88. We have a collective responsibility to support the Central African Republic in ending the cycle of violence. I also call on all national stakeholders to demonstrate ownership and leadership in bridging divides and resolving the conflict. Together, we must work toward ensuring that the peace process delivers a reduction in conflict and tangible improvement in the lives of all Central Africans.

89. I am grateful to my Special Representative, Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, for his dedication and leadership. I deeply appreciate the personnel of MINUSCA, the United Nations country team and the troop- and police-contributing countries for their dedication to the cause of peace in a highly challenging environment. I am also grateful to my Special Representative for Central Africa and Head of the United Nations Office for Central Africa, François Louncény Fall, for his role in the subregion in support of the Central African Republic. I thank the African Union, the Economic Community of Central African States, the European Union, the World Bank, bilateral and international partners and non-governmental organizations for their continued efforts to work with the Government and all Central Africans towards a peaceful and stable Central African Republic.

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